

## A Park and What Surrounds It

Written by Blanca Mesa, BT Contributor  
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### City asks Little Havana residents for ideas

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replace the palm tree with shade trees in Miami, and what do you get? A livable city, a community where you can walk and bike, and be connected.

So says world-renowned urbanist Gil Penalosa, founder of the nonprofit 8 80 Cities, a Toronto-based urban parks and mobility advocacy group.

“We’re happier walking because when we walk, we use all our senses,” Penalosa says, adding that we were created to walk, just as birds fly and fish swim.

Penalosa came to Miami recently as part of the Miami Downtown Development Authority’s (DDA) “Linked & Liveable” Miami Immersion Week. One stop on his whirlwind tour of public meetings? Henderson Park, a small urban green space in the city’s crowded East Little Havana neighborhood.

Crammed into the park are tennis courts, soccer fields, a community center, a playground, and two scrappy parcels of grass that no one seems to know what to do with. A tall metal fence holds it all in. Narrow, treeless streets with narrow sidewalks surround the park, making the journey to it feel unsafe and uncomfortable.

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Henderson is ground zero in the battle to re-green and reconnect Miami. It was identified by the DDA as a critical component in its plan to promote transportation and connectivity through better transit, and “complete streets” that give walkers and bikers equal rights.

“Henderson is in a very strategic location close to downtown,” says Anneliese Morales, a Little Havana resident and long-time activist. “It’s a secret park in an area that has virtually no parks.”

In the waning light of a recent weekday, teens kick soccer balls in the park, and children scramble on the playground equipment. Inside the community center pavilion, a crowd is eager to hear Penalosa’s 8 80 philosophy for urban spaces. He tells them that a city gets it right when its public spaces work for both 8-year-olds and 80-year-olds.

The residents give feedback on what they’d like to see in their park and their community. Trees and flowers get the most “votes” on a poster board list of priorities.

“I’m not surprised,” says Laurie Fucini-Joy, an engineer with Urban Health Partnerships (UHP). “Going to a park is a relief. It’s hot and you need a relaxing green area.”

UHP works with the Live Healthy Little Havana initiative in the City of Miami to find ways the built environment can help improve the health of residents. Parks, bike lanes, and safe sidewalks play a crucial role, she says. UHP will paint colorful crosswalks on the streets leading to Henderson Park to make them more visible. Shade trees and more parks would be great, too, she adds.

“We need community leaders to step up and listen to the voices of people in Little Havana,” she says.

Penalosa is big on public spaces that accommodate everyone. “The community’s quality of life depends on how we treat our most vulnerable -- our children, the elderly, the poorest among us,” he explains. He is also big on mobility and public spaces.

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Parks should include everything from tot-lots to *viejotecas*, or *discoteques* for elders to dance to their music, he says. And above all, safe passage by making streets accessible, safe, lined with shade trees, and with marked crosswalks, which are sorely missing at Henderson Park and throughout the city.

Penalosa loves walking and biking because he says they're the only individual transport methods and also the most democratic and affordable. Instead of spending money on widening roads, governments should shift funds to make streets safer for pedestrians and bicyclists, and invest in public spaces and parks.

"It's very clear Miami has been built for cars, not people," Penalosa explains. "It will need a major transportation shift. Right now, many streets are too big, too wide, and it's very dangerous for pedestrians."

In downtown Miami, Penalosa was struck by the unwieldiness of Biscayne Boulevard, and its air pollution and traffic noise. And he was dismayed by how the grand boulevard with a parking lot in the middle cuts off the waterfront from the rest of the city.

"It doesn't make sense for the street to be so wide," he says.

The city also needs many more trees. Greening the city is tied to economic vitality, he believes.

"World-class cities have the best quality of life, which is one of the most important tools of economic competitiveness in a globalized world. Miami could be a very green city but it has to be more ambitious to get there."

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